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Congress restarts, eyes U.S. economy

Lawmakers from Wisconsin support stimulus packages

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WASHINGTON - Veteran lawmakers greeted each other, freshmen members navigated their way around the U.S. Capitol, and lawmakers' families filled the public galleries to watch the first day of the 111th Congress.

While Tuesday had the air of a social gathering, Wisconsin lawmakers know they face a challenging to-do list in 2009.

At the top of that list is putting together a package to deal with a deepening recession.

Key congressional members, including Rep. Dave Obey, D-Wausau, are working with economic advisers to President-elect Barack Obama on an economic stimulus package with a price tag that could exceed \$1 trillion.

Obey, chairman of the House Appropriations Committee, zipped between the House floor and his chairman's office. He declined to say how much the package might cost.

"That's for the president to say," Obey said, referring to Obama.

Obey scoffed at lawmakers who supported the Bush administration's deficit spending for the Iraq war but now worry about an economic stimulus package increasing the national debt.

"That's like getting religion a day after the church has closed," he said as headed onto the floor.

Rep. Tom Petri, R-Fond du Lac, said he's willing to add to the deficit if the economic stimulus bill is well-constructed and likely to be effective. Petri said he voted against bailout bills for the financial and auto industries last year because they were hastily put together and seemed impractical.

"If we do nothing (for the economy) then tax receipts will fall and the deficit will rise," Petri said.

"I think we need a very significant package" that provides tax breaks to aid businesses, helps states pay for vital services and provide jobs, he said.

Rep. Steve Kagen, D-Appleton, also thinks an economic stimulus package is needed.

"I look at it as a recovery act. The way I look at it, we have to invest in America's infrastructure," Kagen said. He'd like to see targeted tax cuts included in the bill and strong emphasis on "jobs, jobs, jobs."

For Kagen, the day was calmer than his first day in Congress in 2007. As a freshman, he had a big crowd of friends, relatives and supporters in town for his swearing-in ceremony.

Tuesday marked the start of his second term, and he had only a few family members in town. The Wisconsin delegation had no freshman members this year.

Putting together a stimulus package is at the top of the Senate's to-do list. However, the Senate also has the responsibility of reviewing Obama's nominees for Cabinet and other posts.

Obama's nomination process got renewed attention this week. He got a cool reception from the chairwoman of the Senate intelligence committee on his selection of Leon Panetta, a respected Washington veteran with little experience in the intelligence field, as the next director of the Central Intelligence Agency. Obama's Commerce Department nominee, New Mexico Gov. Bill Richardson, made the surprise announcement Sunday that he was withdrawing his name from consideration because of an ongoing federal investigation into a California firm's political contributions to him.

Wisconsin Sen. Russ Feingold, who has called for changes in CIA interrogation methods of detainees, said the nomination of Panetta shows Obama recognizes the need for "fresh leadership for the intelligence community."

As a member of the Senate intelligence committee, Feingold, a Democrat, will question Panetta during his confirmation hearing.

"I look forward to closely examining his record, hearing his plans for protecting our nation against al-Qaida and other threats, and learning how he will help restore the rule of law after years of lawlessness that have undermined our national security," Feingold said in a statement.

As members of the Senate Judiciary Committee, Feingold and Wisconsin Sen. Herb Kohl also will be part of the confirmation hearing of Attorney General-designate Eric Holder.

Republicans have promised to thoroughly question Holder, who served in the Justice Department's No. 2 spot during President Bill Clinton's administration.

Holder didn't block a controversial pardon Clinton gave fugitive financier Marc Rich. The pardon came after Rich's ex-wife gave more than \$1 million to Democrats and expensive gifts to the Clintons.

Kohl, D-Wis., said he worked with Holder during the Clinton years.

"I trust his judgment and his commitment to restoring the integrity of our nation's top law enforcement agency," Kohl said in a statement.